



Even the Dust

anarchist pamphlet. n°1
November 21, 2015

“The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not until then, will he have a glimpse of truth”

~ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

The Legitimacy of Law Enforcement Agencies

Acknowledging Police Intimidation

Montreal, Front Commun Protest, October 3, 2015

A line of police officers armed with guns and batons occupies the east side of McGill College Avenue. Accustomed to the quasi-military presence of these so-called “forces of order”, the majority of the protesters present pay little, if any, attention to this intimidating show of force. Curiously, these same protesters are the ones who, in their public institutions, enforce “zero tolerance” policies towards intimidation, ardently opposing this destructive force. The double standard is striking and looks something like this:

Whereas we readily acknowledge and denounce the intimidation resulting from a child’s attempt to render fellow schoolchildren subservient, the vast majority of us refuse to acknowledge the intimidation inherent in police practices in spite of the fact that the goal of a police force, much like the goal of the child autocrat, is to enforce obedience. If we readily admit that the child’s attempt to enforce obedience constitutes intimidation, then why are we so reluctant to label as intimidation this same attempt when it is carried out by a police force?

On the Necessity and the Legitimacy of Police Intimidation

For those of you who think this intimidation necessary, and thus legitimate, ask yourself the following questions: Does the schoolchild’s intimidation promote the proper functioning of the schoolyard or is it more likely to inhibit it? Does the schoolchild’s intimidation promote the security and well-being of the other children or is it more suited to rendering them subservient? Does the schoolchild’s intimidation promote peace between the schoolchildren or is it more likely to foster division and despair amongst them?

It is at this point that ardent defenders of the police will attempt to differentiate the intimidation used by the child from that used by police. They will do so by arguing that police intimidation serves a social function – that of guaranteeing social peace – a function that the child’s intimidation in no way serves.

According to this argument, police intimidation is justified because it promotes social peace. This argument overlooks the fact that oppressive means such as intimidation are incapable of promoting peaceful ends. Oppression and peace are mutually exclusive. Therefore, it is impossible to argue that the one promotes the other.

Police intimidation is identical to the child’s intimidation and cannot be defended by the generalized and erroneous belief that it promotes social peace.

The Intellectual Subjugation of the People

Before a new pharmaceutical product is brought to market, we first require that it be evaluated by an independent organization capable of *a*) evaluating the benefits and risks associated with the product and of *b*) determining the efficacy of the product. In theory, this evaluation shields us from the false assertions and crippling bias of pharmaceutical companies.

Curiously, when our government imposes a police force upon us, this wariness – the one that protects us from the pharmaceutical company by requiring reliable proof – suddenly disappears and, without ever requiring any proof, we blindly accept governmental assertions such as “the police promotes social peace”.

Proving the Legitimacy of Law Enforcement Agencies

To prove the legitimacy of an institution, whichever it may be, one must first subject it to philosophical critique. If the institution crumbles under the weight of this critique, it is illegitimate (Chomsky 178)¹. If, on the other hand, the institution survives philosophical critique, the conclusions derived from the arguments defending the institution must be validated by means of an independent evaluation of

the empirical facts. Once these are in agreement with the philosophical defense of the institution, the legitimacy of the institution follows.

To prove the legitimacy of law enforcement agencies, the government must answer, amongst others, the following questions:

Is coercion likely to promote peace or to facilitate subjugation?

What circumstances justify the use of coercion?

Why is it fair and desirable that only one institution be authorized to use violence in a legitimate manner?

What justifies the use of weapons by law enforcement agencies but not by any other organization of men?

In what way does a weapon contribute to social peace? The primary functions of a weapon are to intimidate, wound, and kill; are these not antithetical to peace?

Is weaponry not liable to facilitate oppression and subjugation rather than emancipation and liberation?

Is a weapon not a symbol and source of antagonisms rather than a symbol and source of cooperation between individuals?

Given that the above-mentioned questions constitute only a small fraction of the theoretical issues with which law enforcement agencies must deal before being able to prove their legitimacy, it is highly unlikely that this institution would resist a more thorough philosophical examination.

If, however, it does survive a thorough philosophical examination, an empirical study of the facts would still have to be conducted in order to confirm or refute the conclusions obtained during the philosophical inquiry.

The legitimacy of law enforcement agencies depends entirely upon this philosophical and empirical study and upon the reasoned conclusions derived from it.

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¹Chomsky, Noam. On Anarchism. Edinburgh: AK Press. 2005. PDF. <<https://libcom.org/files/1345266991261.pdf>>.

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